

Toga novels and Victorian culture

Simon Goldhill

In this article, Simon Goldhill examines the cultural importance of the immensely popular Victorian ‘toga novels’, fictions which were set in the ancient past of the Roman Empire. Far from escapist fluff, these novels were provocative texts that engaged with the burning issues of their day – and illustrated the importance of Classics in questioning established values.

What do you think was the best-selling book in America from 1880 to 1920? One work sold literally millions of copies, and when it was turned into a play it was seen by a staggering 20 million paying customers. That’s more people than watch even ‘X Factor’... It was a book that you could reasonably say that Everybody Knew. This blockbuster, fascinatingly for us classicists, was a novel about the Roman Empire, written by a former general in the Civil War and Ambassador to the Ottoman Court, namely Lew Wallace. The story was later made into a hugely popular film too, and it staged one of the most famous chariot races in film history. The book, of course, was *Ben Hur*.

Who was Ben Hur?

Not many people read *Ben Hur* these days, or know that it was a Victorian novel, let alone the best-selling book in America. And I bet most people know the chariot race without even having seen the whole film. It may come as something of a surprise, then, to learn that the subtitle of *Ben Hur* is ‘A Story of the Christ’. The first sixty pages of the book are a mystical account of the arrival of the three wise men in Jerusalem for the birth of Jesus. The character Ben Hur is a Jewish revolutionary in ancient Palestine, who rebels against Rome, and becomes a Christian – and so, as the author concludes, actually won in his fight against the Roman Empire since it was eventually conquered by Christianity. Ben Hur even turns out – according to Lew Wallace’s fiction – to have been a figure well-known in the Gospels. In the Gospel of Mark, there is a very strange character, a young man in a tunic, who runs up to Jesus as he is being led to the Crucifixion, and then flees without his clothes as the crowd try and grab

him. No-one has ever been able to work out what this verse means or who the guy is. But in *Ben Hur* this unnamed, barely dressed man is the hero, Ben Hur himself. It is Ben Hur too, it turns out, who was the anonymous chap who gave Jesus on the Cross a sponge soaked in vinegar to slake his thirst. Lew Wallace had no hesitation in writing his own version of the story of Jesus.

Greece & Rome in the Victorian world

There are actually over 200 novels about the ancient Roman Empire written in the Victorian era. It is a whole genre that has been largely forgotten. But it was one of the key ways that Victorian readers imagined the past. The school curriculum – in the posh schools at least – was eighty per cent Classics (now there’s a policy for the government...); classics was very much part of the furniture of the mind for the Victorian gentleman (and ladies too, increasingly). The Victorians liked to say that a knowledge of the Classics was a sign of true breeding and class. There was a big audience for these novels because Classics already held such an important place in the imagination – and the novels helped foster that picture of the Grandeur that was Rome to add to the Glory that was Greece.

When I started reading these two-hundred-plus novels I had an idea that the Victorians liked to write about the Roman Empire again and again not only because Classics was such a hot topic throughout English culture, but also because the English Empire was also one of the biggest issues of the day. It seemed to me that the Roman Empire would be a good way for the English to talk about Empire without getting too close and dirty to their own politics and their own military domination of the world. You could talk about

Empire in the case of Rome and make your point about today.

Stories of empires: Roman & British

There are one or two novels that do something like that. G. A. Henty was one of the inventors of the Boy’s Own heroic story, where the hero is always a plucky young lad who is honest and strong and who fights for justice and truth (and is usually English, of course, and certainly not a dirty foreigner... You can see where Harry Potter comes from...). Henty’s books sold hundreds of thousands of copies to schoolboys and men who thought they were still schoolboys across the British Empire. Henty wrote a novel called *Beric the Briton*, where the hero is a young Briton faced by the Roman legions. He has been brought up partly by Romans so he understands military discipline and helps the Britons revolt, and leads them to have some military success, before the Romans inevitably triumph. Henty is quite explicit that an empire needs the proper values of discipline, training, and obedience, and it is only when the strength and vigour of the Britons combine with the discipline and training of the Romans that the new compound – the English – can go on to rule the world.

Christianity in the toga novels

Henty, I hope, does not seem very palatable today, and, although his stories were once hugely popular, it is striking that his rather blunt version of why the Empire was a success doesn’t really occur much in the Victorian toga novel. To my surprise, the vast majority of these two hundred novels are about something else altogether. It turns out that the vast majority of these novels were set in the Roman Empire not to talk about the British Empire but in order to talk about Christianity. In this, *Ben Hur* is absolutely typical. Of the two hundred novels, maybe one hundred and ninety are explicitly about how Christianity came into being. Why should this be the case? Why did so many different novelists want to write about Rome and the beginnings of

Christianity?

The answer to these questions is fascinating and goes to the heart of why and how the Victorians cared about Classics. First of all, we have to remember that Christianity was a completely dominant cultural force in Britain throughout the nineteenth century. Religion was the most heatedly debated, passionately cherished, and deeply exciting issue, and, in the nineteenth century, a more bitterly contested battleground than in any other period except the Reformation. The previous best-seller in America was *Robert Ellsmere* by Mrs Humphry Ward which sold in its hundreds of thousands. Its riveting subject? A vicar who loses his faith. *Ben Hur* was a success partly because its Christian tale was seen as an antidote to *Robert Ellsmere*. If you were a student in the nineteenth century, religion was the one subject you just had to talk about and at length.

But why was Christianity such a contested arena for the Victorians? It was not because of science or Darwin, whatever Richard Dawkins and other modern scientists will tell you. Most Christians, even the evangelicals, had no problem with Darwin then. Although there were a few well-known rows about science and religion, it is only in more modern times that Darwin has become a word with which to shout down Christians. It was actually *history* and above all *ancient history* that caused the greatest anxieties.

Why was ancient history a problem?

How did the study of history cause so much difficulty for Victorian Christians? The new critical history looked at sources with a sharply questioning eye, and tried to distinguish between myth, ideological distortion and truth. As Ranke famously put it, historians should seek to find out 'how it actually happened'. This hard-nosed fact-based empiricism, which began with the classical past, was turned towards the stories of early Christianity, which all took place in the classical past. First, the stories of the saints were found to be the sort of story you might tell to a pious but naïve peasant and not what a historian in search of plausibility and evidence could possibly believe. Then, even more scandalously, the Gospels themselves were put under the microscope. Suddenly the evidence for Christianity did not match up to the standards of evidence that a good historian demanded. It was by studying ancient history that Robert Ellsmere lost his faith.

Questioning established values: the importance of the Classics

Classics in the Victorian period is often associated with conservatism and empire.

But it was also the route through which the most challenging attack on the establishment took place. It was through ancient history that the Church, faith, and religion were increasingly questioned. That's why novel after novel is set in the Roman Empire – and looks at how Christianity came about. *Ben Hur* was written precisely because Lew Wallace wanted to prove for himself that the new challenges to the historical value of Christianity were misplaced – and the book was a massive hit not just because it is a great story, but also because it helped people face up to the most burning issue of the day.

We do the Victorians and Classics a real disservice if we forget how provocative and significant a subject antiquity was – and we fail to understand our own past if we do not appreciate that the study of Christianity and Classics were interwoven in Victorian culture. Victorian novels about the Roman Empire are a sign and a symptom of the most pressing and dangerous cultural battle in nineteenth-century Britain.

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